

# The Historical and Racial Context of Cultural Competency: How Should America Respond?

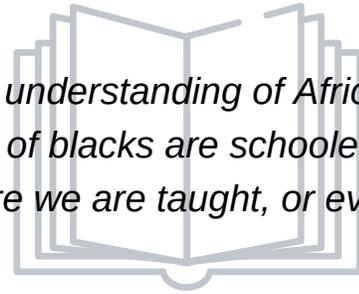
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**Cultural competency.** What does it mean to you? Why should it matter? How does an individual or organization improve in this area in light of nationwide protests and current events? It has many synonyms, and it's often developed (or overlooked) throughout life based on an individual's class, upbringing, life experiences, education, and attitudes. But how many of us — as well as the organizations and businesses we operate, or who employ us — are adept at cultural competency without the associated guilt if we're not part of a racial minority?

From my perspective, cultural competency is the ability to understand the unique differences of another culture/class/community/race/ethnicity and be able to respond accordingly without being judgmental, prejudicial, or inconsequential in our actions, and just as important, interactions with a particular group.

*By and large, most whites have just a cursory understanding of African-American history and culture, while the majority of blacks are schooled and well-versed in mainstream history often before we are taught, or even embrace, our own.*



Our nation is changing, and whether we realize or want to accept it, America is at an intersection point. Keep in place the status quo or deal with this subject constructively, proactively, and holistically.

Cultural competency is not about a quota system (although optics matter a great deal when an organization's workforce or board makeup doesn't reflect the general population, in particular, African-American representation). It's not about sympathy, empathy, or appeasement, any of which can be heavily influenced by guilt-derived, short-lived feelings. No, cultural competency takes a rational approach to do the right thing at the right moment for all the right reasons.

Race often plays an integral (but shouldn't be the exclusive factor) in how we define or interpret cultural competency. As a black man with diverse friendships and life experiences, I've embraced this subject for several reasons. First, the images and media coverage surrounding the gripping protests are surreal (*How did we stumble to this point?*) Second, I've had several friends, primarily white males in leadership positions, reach out to me. Even over the phone, I could sense their reluctance and apprehension to discuss their perspective for fear of being labeled a privileged observer or worse, an out-of-touch racist (*Why is there so much trepidation in their voices?*) Third, constructive dialogue is critically needed to

diffuse tensions, along with an actionable, long-term game plan with a holistic investment focus given the emotional, societal, and organizational stakes at play (*What happens to America if we fail to respond appropriately?*) Fourth, and this is an extension of my previous point, if our nation drops the cultural competency ball, how will we move forward with hot-button issues that involve policing, protesting, and politicizing? (*Where do we go from here, and who leads us?*) Fifth, for nearly two decades growing up poor, black, and fatherless, I often felt invisible in mainstream society (*Can you hear the voice of the voiceless today?*)

In my latest book, *Momentum Power Play: How to Create It if You've Never Had It and Keep It Going Once You've Got it*, I recount a painful story that I hope resonates with you. Mr. G, my white fifth grade teacher, made it his driving ambition to ruin as many impressionable black minds as he could. Black students were disproportionately punished while Mr. G gave a pass to white students for the same minor offenses, for example, chewing gum or talking out of turn in class. He had a chart in his room that was a psychological and educational trap.

On the right side of his merit-based, racially biased chart were "Good", "Better", and "Best" behavior descriptions. On the left side, outlined in bold letters were "On the Way", "Almost There", and "Jail". Black

students — most of whom were bused over five miles from our housing project to this school situated in a middle-class neighborhood — spent the majority of time that school year on the unfavorable side of Mr. G’s chart. We received the bulk of Mr. G’s wrath. We were paddled regularly, had our palms hit with a thick ruler, and spent quite a bit of time standing in the corner with our nose to the wall, our hands up, and feet spread apart as if we were under arrest.

Ready for the most egregious part of this story, which took place in the early 1980s? Mr. G’s colleagues — other teachers and school administrators — were aware of his exploits but did not intervene on our behalf. They knew how he felt about “blacks invading his middle-class environment through forced busing.” In many respects, their silence was as shocking as Mr. G’s misdeeds.

Overall, Mr. G was an outlier in regard to my academic experiences. However, his insidious actions likely negatively impacted dozens, if not hundreds, of black students over the course of a multi-decade teaching career. Whether in the public or private sector, when onlookers see a cultural competency need and have the capacity to fill it but don’t, a lot of innocent people suffer in the process. Inevitably, others’ problems become their own as collateral damage runs its course.

How an organization or firm handles  
**CULTURAL COMPETENCY**  
*can be a landmine or goldmine*



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In closing, cultural competency matters in our personal, professional, and political dealings. When individuals, organizations, and businesses dismiss this subject, or refuse to address it productively, social circles, work environments, and corporate board positions remain less diverse. Many corporations over the last decade have implemented diversity programs in hopes of bridging various gaps, but the gaping hole may still exist in terms of cultural competency. And we can’t blame it all on political correctness. Why? Optics. Dialogue is fine, but seeing is believing with 2020 vision. Cultural competency — individually and corporately — is worth the investment. Relationships are expanded while misunderstandings and assumptions are kept in check. Committed organizations win in the court of public opinion, a priceless benefit in our overly saturated, social-media world. And we know this kind of goodwill can be leveraged indefinitely!

I welcome your feedback on this subject and the questions that follow, and look forward to the opportunity to work with you and your organization in regard to a holistic cultural competency program.

**01**

**WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF CULTURAL COMPETENCY?**

**02**

**IN WHAT AREA(S) DO YOU NEED TO IMPROVE AS IT RELATES TO CULTURAL COMPETENCY?**

**03**

**IN WHAT AREA(S) DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION, DEPARTMENT, OR BUSINESS FLOURISH (OR FIZZLE) WHEN IT COMES TO CULTURAL COMPETENCY?**

**04**

**WHAT SPECIFIC STEPS SHOULD YOUR ORGANIZATION, DEPARTMENT, OR BUSINESS TAKE TO IMPROVE ITS CULTURAL COMPETENCY FOOTPRINT WITH COLLEAGUES, CLIENTS/CUSTOMERS, AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS?**

**05**

**WHERE APPLICABLE, HOW DIVERSE IS YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT AND/OR CORPORATE BOARD, AND IS IT REFLECTIVE OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION IN GENERAL OF ROUGHLY 14 PERCENT?**

Feel free to contact me at [info@MrFundy.com](mailto:info@MrFundy.com)

**CONTACT NOW**

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